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THE ATELIER SYSTEM*

BY LLOYD WARREN, F. A. I. A.

Past President of the Society of Beaux Arts Architects

WE hear much of "ateliers" without knowing exactly what they are. The word "atelier" simply means a workshop, and in our sense of the word an artist's workshop or studio; therefore an Atelier System would mean an organization of studios, and such it is, but of course there may be any number of such systems organized for different needs. The curious thing about it is, however, that I know of only two of them now in existence in this country; these were created by the Society of Beaux Arts Architects for the study of architectural design and of sculpture, and are modelled generally on the method of instruction adopted by the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

The scheme is simple enough: a number of schools teaching any one art or craft agree to execute an identical problem at certain given times, the work thus produced is all exhibited together and a jury passes on it, rating the various objects according to their merits. For instance, in the course in architectural design just alluded to there are some thirty or thirty-five different ateliers of students situated in nearly as many cities of the United States and Canada, all studying architecture under different masters and methods, besides isolated students without any masters at all, in all about 1,000 in number, who receive at stated times from the Society of Beaux Arts Architects' Committee programmes embodying problems in architectural design; as many of these students as care to, send to the exhibition which is held in New York, drawings showing their solutions of these problems, and their instructors come on to form the jury of awards, assisted by other architects. The result has been most effective in producing draughtsmen of the very highest type.

This, in short, is what the Atelier System is. It makes the largest field in which students may compare their respective abilities, it stimulates them to put their

very best energies into their work, and it brings to the fore the best men in that kind of work which wins competitions. At the exhibitions the students study each other's work carefully, and in this way broaden enormously their perspective of the possibilities of every problem. The instructors likewise profit greatly by observation of the results obtained from the students through the different methods of instruction prevalent in the various ateliers, and discuss among themselves the merits of these, returning to their schools broadened by these discussions.

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages of this chain of ateliers over the large individual school is that it permits of many methods of instruction, and compels the abandonment of poor methods by the defection of students from ateliers badly run. The history of the separate ateliers is expressive of this; at one time one of them may have a great attendance of students, and suddenly these students will fall off to join some other atelier because their original instructor has been changed, or because the presence of some higher grade students in another atelier creates there a finer atmosphere. And so the students are kept on the "qui vive" with perfect liberty to go where their advantages are the greatest.

The chief reproach which has been made to the Atelier System is that it simply trains a man to win competitions and does not develop the true artist. This in a measure is undoubtedly true. We all know the faults of trial by jury, and the advantage that meretricious presentation, luck and plausibility ever has before one; and this of course is a jury system. For the artist of exquisite sensibility perhaps this is not a field, but we do need a training school for the man who can dominate in competition, and this furnishes one for him.

In this age of centralization where everything tends to cluster about one governing center, the Atelier System is a safeguard. We are afraid of losing time and power by duplication of effort, so one self-created.

*Address delivered before the Convention of the American Federation of Arts at Washington, May 12, 1915.

self-complacent school arises and all students flock unquestioningly to it, often only to find out too late that they have been misled. The atelier is a means of escape, and the Atelier System unveils the deception; as quick as a thought the student can desert a false master and find a better one.

The essential principles of the Atelier System, it is evident, are: open competition and public exhibition, and the whole efficiency of the system depends on the degree of the openness and the publicity. The individual instructors may be narrow, or the jury may be biased and the awards may be ill judged, but after all is said and done the work of the student is exhibited, there, to speak for itself and the intelligent student will judge for himself, draw his own conclusions and lay out his own course.

In short, the Atelier System as compared to the Academic System is democracy as compared to aristocracy; it admits of the expression of the individual as against subserviency to a dominant influence, but it must be remembered that the individual is always free to choose a guiding influence if he so desires it.

Now, after all, does not this principle of the Atelier System exist implicitly in all those institutions which have made for general progress in the arts of civilization? What indeed is the Paris "Salon" other than an Atelier System, excepting that the work of some artists is refused admittance, if indeed this refused work can really be considered the work of artists? And in fact this work finally is shown, for every year now there is besides the salon, a "Salon des Refusés."

How different the Paris Salon is from our exhibitions by invitation where the principle of open public competition is abandoned. These exhibitions are cultural, if you please, but they are not stimulating to the outsider because they are not in it themselves, nor to the insiders because they are already there!

I have always tried to bring my students as closely as possible in their work to the tasks of real life, and how much more closely can we mimic it than by this system? We give them a real problem, we expose them to the competition of their peers and then to the judgment of the miniature public which is our jury.

All this discussion opens up a vista of the possible scope of the Atelier System in the development of those great industries of today which we may call the sumptuary arts.

These industries are very different from those of public utility where a perfectly definite and concrete end is ever before the workers. Every metallurgist of the nineteenth century knew that a cheap method for producing aluminum was needed, and that method was found; today the same is true for radium. But in this matter of art, of that subtle sense which we call taste, there is nothing tangible to which we can hold. Take, for instance, the subject of woman's dress. As far as its economic manufacture is concerned, I fancy we are well equipped, yet France has an absolute monopoly in the higher grades of its production and probably employs as great a number of work people in its various branches and makes as much money out of it as our United States Steel Corporation, or as the Standard Oil Company make out of those industries.

Now, we have an idea that taste is the God-given prerogative of the French, and that a savage Frenchwoman on a desert island (if we may treat ourselves to an extravagant hypothesis) would immediately deck herself out bewitchingly in the sea weed she might pick up on the shore! However this may be, the French don't count on this heavenly gift as much as we suppose. This is how they set to work about it; they have schools, not one, but many, where the girls are taken in right after their primary education is finished—at about fourteen—and for four or five years they are in ateliers learning the trade; when a girl has been practicing tying bow-knots for five years she gets to learn how to do it far better than those who have not. Of course, in their instruction, there is a systematic development of the aesthetic palate, which counts a great deal, and which in our methods is entirely neglected. The Atelier System is completed in the line of dressmaking by the continual exhibition of toilettes which takes place on every possible occasion, races, reviews, horse shows and what not, which are crowded by the dress-makers and their assistants as onlookers.

Of course, I have chosen the subject of

dressmaking, on account of my audience here today, many of whom I have counted on would be ladies, and therefore primarily interested in this topic, but I do not speak unadvisedly as I have visited the chief woman's industrial school in Paris, besides the school of applied design for men, where the students are just as likely to be given a competitive problem for the embroidery of a woman's opera cloak as for designing the plate for the winner of the Grand Prix de Longchamps.

Now I do not believe there is much doubt but that the French have been since the sixteenth century, and are now, the nation which leads the world in art, pure and applied, and if we watch closely their method of production we find that it is most intimately intertwined with the principles which are those essential to the Atelier System, namely, open competition and public exhibition.

I am not trying to defend luxury nor sumptuous living, but we have to face the

existence of facts. There is a great and growing demand for those articles which are dependent on art development, and I have had enough experience to know that the maker of these things can be produced in this country, and I believe that a proper system of instruction, only is necessary to develop him. But not as long as the school or academic system prevails.

It requires but a moment's consideration to detect the vice of the isolated school system; the student instead of drawing his inspiration from the atmosphere in which his public live and feel takes it from one instructor. The instructor is, necessarily, inferior to the final criterion of taste, from the simple fact that he is not that criterion, he expresses simply an individual opinion. So the student spends his time in satisfying the requirements of a person who is really of no importance whatsoever, whereas he should be developing himself in harmony with an environment in the midst of which he is destined to work.

A NOTABLE WORK IN STAINED GLASS

A MEMORIAL WINDOW

THE window illustrated on the opposite page is the work of William and Annie Lee Willet who designed and executed, it will be remembered, the east window in the great hall of the Graduate School of Princeton, and also the Chancel window in the West Point Chapel.

It represents the saints in the Lord presented faultless before the throne; the Church, His Bride, welcomed by the Bridegroom in the presence of His Holy Angels, and has recently been placed in Calvary Church, Germantown, in memory of Mrs. Letitia Henry Harrison.

Separating the main upper portion from the predella is a delicate Gothic vine supporting an interlacing scroll on which is inscribed the theme, "For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." In the predella a procession of martyrs holding their crosses and palms of victory gives a note of unusual

effectiveness, creating an impression of "a great multitude which no man can number," leading the eye and mind of the beholder up to the Christ enthroned in a glory of golden light. Above the Saviour and breaking through the vision of angels is the rainbow of promise. The legend at the base reads "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of Thy Lord." The treatment is purely symbolic.

The window is located in the North Transept and receives no direct sun; hence the color scheme is unusual—combining delicacy with brilliance. The dominant note is silvery white which is made, however, to vibrate by sparkling bits of ruby, blue, green and purple placed skillfully in juxtaposition. The effect is similar to that obtained in the primitive glass and by the earliest workers. It is an interesting and successful experiment in the play of color and light, in the use of symbolism with the object of decoration.